

Dear Members of the Human Services Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly:

My name is Katherine Bickford. I am a resident of Manchester and I am writing on behalf of Uniting for a Safe Inclusive Community – Manchester (USIC).

USIC is a grassroots organization consisting of diverse community members in the Manchester area. We advocate with community members impacted by systems of oppression for socially just policies at the local, state, and national levels. We understand the importance of HB 6616 because many of our members are either currently undocumented or were undocumented at some point in their lives, and they have been adversely impacted by the lack of access to health care resulting from their immigration status.

Expanding access to HUSKY up to age 26 regardless of immigration status is an important step in making sure our immigrant community has access to the healthcare we all need and deserve. But our work doesn't end with expanding access up to age 26; we need to open access to HUSKY and healthcare to all immigrants of any age. If Connecticut wants a future that includes healthy families and a stable, thriving and growing workforce that is ready to meet the needs of our future, Connecticut must ensure that these individuals have access to health coverage.

To be clear, we believe that expanding HUSKY access to **all** immigrants is the socially just thing to do and would ultimately benefit us all as a connected community, both from an ethical and a cost-perspective. We strongly support HB 6616 as a necessary next step to move us toward this goal, ensuring that a growing number of undocumented community members have access to healthcare coverage.

As an organization advocating with community members impacted by systems of oppression, we believe that healthcare is a human right, and that this alone is sufficient reason to pass HB 6616 and to ultimately expand Husky to cover all immigrants. From a practical perspective, we see many reasons to do so as well. We will discuss a few of these below.

We know that there are many costs associated with lack of access to healthcare, both for the individual and for our society. An uninsured individual is less likely to have access to a primary care physician. This makes it more likely that they will wait until something that could have been easily treated in a routine fashion has reached the level of an emergency, typically resulting in much more expensive care than it otherwise would have required. Uninsured individuals are also more likely to seek care for non-emergency conditions (such as common infections, viruses, etc.) in the Emergency Room, due to their lack of access to a primary care physician. We have seen the burdensome costs to our members of having to rely on emergency care instead of routine primary care, forcing families to choose between paying rent, paying for food, and covering medical bills. We have helped many families seek out assistance from friends and neighbors and navigate the systems of requesting financial assistance or a reduction to their bill.

We also acknowledge that the costs of uncompensated care are passed on to the entire community, both documented and undocumented, in various ways. For example, we see this impact in higher premiums and higher healthcare costs overall. Having access to Husky for everyone up to the age of 26 would reduce the reliance on emergency care and reduce costs associated with uncompensated care in our state. Additionally, access to HUSKY would allow families to avoid the burden of needing to choose between trying to pay for their children's healthcare and paying for other necessities like food

and housing.

We have also seen the importance of access to mental health services in our undocumented community, especially in our families that have experienced domestic violence. Many undocumented individuals carry with them trauma from their experiences before coming to this country, much of which relates to why they made the difficult decision to leave their country of origin in the first place. Once here, additional stress is layered on top of this trauma simply because of the obstacles they are navigating in order to care and provide for their families. In situations of domestic violence, these stresses are exacerbated by the toxicity of familial dynamics, the trauma of abuse, and the necessity to navigate additional systems (such as the criminal justice system and DCF) as a survivor of abuse. The mental health needs of families in these circumstances are deep and complex and require access to timely and appropriate counseling, none of which is possible without access to health insurance. Allowing access to HUSKY for all immigrants up to age 26, and eventually to all immigrants, would help alleviate these stressors and provide for healthy children and healthy families.

Passing HB 6616 to expand HUSKY access is a necessary step to take at this point in time. It will help alleviate some of the tremendous burdens and stressors experienced by our community, since every additional person covered by health insurance alleviates stressors on their families and friends. Expanding HUSKY will also help move our state toward reducing the overall cost of healthcare, the number of people who are uninsured, and the reliance on emergency care instead of primary care. It will ensure better access to mental health treatment, which can especially benefit survivors of domestic violence. Moving forward, though, we know that healthy children and young adults need healthy families. Children are more likely to see a primary care physician and be able to access appropriate healthcare if their parents also have access to healthcare. Losing healthcare coverage at age 26 disrupts families and puts undue burden on both their immediate community and our healthcare system as a whole. This is why we would like to ask that you not only support the passage of HB 6616, but also create a plan to expand Husky to all immigrants, regardless of both age and status.

Thank you for your time,

Katherine Bickford

On Behalf of Uniting for a Safe Inclusive Community - Manchester